



Nigeria's Youth Frustrated and Stressed

An interview with
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by Angela Odah

As an experienced mental health professional, what is the mental health state of Nigerian youth today and what can be done to support them?

From a psychological point of view I would say that the average Nigerian youth is frustrated and stressed. The youth are subjected to a great deal of stress, trauma and distress. Despite Nigerians being very resilient, we are getting to a point where the political climate and all that is happening in the country has predisposed the youth to some of the conditions mentioned above. These conditions manifest in reactions like excessive aggression and lack of self-control. Substance abuse has been one of the escape mechanism for many youngsters. I would say that the youth are generally mentally unstable, particularly those who are uneducated and with little hope of earning a living. Life stresses, such as unemployment, predispose youths to poor mental health, and this is very prominent in Nigeria, especially considering the bulging youth population. At the prime of their lives youngsters have nothing to look forward to on a daily basis that makes life significant. They are deprived of this because of the high unemployment rate. Having nothing to look forward to can be really damaging.

I believe our government and civil society organisations should look at engaging youths in meaningful activities. Youth inclusive development programmes should be a primary agenda to create jobs and a sense of meaning for them. There should be structures developed to support them. Nigeria is quite a religious society so there should be a holistic approach to addressing this problem by government, civil society organisations and

faith-based groups such as churches, mosques, etc. Communities too should make a concerted effort to explore how we can empower our youths. Recently, I led an intervention in Benue State in response to an epidemic of tramadol opioid abuse that killed five youths in one week. After a needs assessment in the communities, we realised that the challenge is that youth between the ages of 18-30 having nothing to do. They feel their futures slipping away with nothing to look forward to. There is no employment and no skills development. There should be job creation, creation of purpose and creation of alternatives. Inclusive development really is the way forward.

Violence has been a bane to free and fair elections in Nigeria. What can be done to curb this negative trend, especially the use of the youths by conflict entrepreneurs to perpetuate violence during electoral processes and elections?

We need to look at the underlining factors that prompt Nigerian youths to opt for violence during political processes. You will find that, apart from a lack of purpose and the prospects of a bleak future, politicians usually use them to score political points. Youths, and particularly the idle and uninformed, are vulnerable. Our findings, following a survey among the youth, is that in order to sustain their selfish political agendas, politicians often damage the young by introducing them to illicit substances. By providing them with psychoactive substances that provoke aggressive behaviour, they are willing to fight and engage in things they would ordinarily not do. So violence during political processes and elections is not surprising.

Youth are malleable as they are hopeless and live in extreme poverty, so a few peanuts in terms of money goes a long way. Money and drugs buy political loyalty and allow politicians to sabotage political processes for their own selfish gains. The solution is to initiate an alternative narrative where

we sensitize youths and provide programmes that enrich their lives so they are not enticed by cheap alternatives such as illicit substances and being used as tools to satisfy selfish politicians and political agendas.

The 2019 elections are upon us in an environment where there are several theatres of violence scattered across the country and increasing numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs), fleeing from conflict. As a mental health expert, what has been your experience working with these vulnerable groups across Nigeria?

CHARIS works with internally displaced people, particularly women and the youth within IDP camps. Some displaced groups have formed as a result of a current insurgency in the north east region, while others as a result of conflict between farmers and herdsmen. Some have been in this situation since the insurgency started. What we see in the camps is not dissimilar to what we see in the general community.

However, another dimension to the current mental health situation among internally displaced people is their exposure to significant trauma. Youths are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders with symptoms ranging from loss of meaning, purpose, aggressive behaviour to withdrawal, etc. So you encounter a great deal of disillusionment, particularly as a consequence of unfair political situations and leaders who do not deliver on their campaign promises. There is anger, tension, agitation and a desire for vengeance because of the loss and the government's failure to act that resulted in their present situation and poor living conditions. The list of grievances is endless.

Youth who are pained and vulnerable latch onto cheap alternatives, as mentioned above. IDP youth, specifically those who were displaced as a result of the Fulani herdsmen and farmers' crisis, are taking up arms and resorting to violence. They are

preparing for 2019 to retaliate against a government that has failed to protect them and provide alternatives for them to acquire basic needs. Some are prepared and look forward to joining someone who will arm them and support them, even if it means fighting against the current government.

You have worked closely with women and youths in IDP camps. What would you say are the key challenges they face and how can this be addressed?

Mental health support is urgently required so CHARIS started providing trauma healing for IDPs. In as much as these people lost material possessions, their psychological health and well-being has also deteriorated. While providing for their physical needs is important, we realised it was even more important to deal with underlining issues. Apart from resettlement, there is an urgent need to address trauma and provide mental health support.

When people started living in camps, they thought they would only be there for a year or two. Now it's indefinite. So how do we integrate these peoples back into society? How do we return them into a daily routine of waking up with some purpose? Resettlement is key to their wellbeing because people are tired of hand-me-downs and wonder "What can I do for my life?" "How do I fend for my family or plan for my future?" So alternative measures need to be put in place.

Women specifically need to be economically empowered and equipped through asset transfer so that they have a sense of purpose. In this way they will understand their basic human rights and strive towards gender-based inclusive development in which their rights are acknowledged, and they recognise that they have a political role to play.

Youths need this too. There needs to be awareness and sensitization around violence, mental health

and other issues. The youth need to be equipped to understand their rights and channel them in positive ways. Basic life skills is so important for our youth and women, especially among the IDPs so they can pick up the pieces of their lives and become productive members of a society that has hurt them so badly.

After visiting the Loko and Guma communities facilitating trauma healing among groups of youth and women displaced as a result of the Fulani Herdsmen Crisis in local government areas of Benue State, I received a distress call from some of the young people in the community. They reported an attack on the community and said they were running away. They said we had told them to disarm but they were unwilling to do so under the current circumstances. They wanted to know what to do. They said some youths wanted to go into the military and become part of the armed forces so that they could legally fight a system that, according to them, was responsible for their suffering and had failed to prevent ongoing violence against their communities.

We need to provide alternatives otherwise politicians will recruit these vulnerable youth. In 2019 we need a different narrative. Youth need healthy skills to engage in politics. We also need to sensitize our politicians so that the older people will see the value of including young people in political decision making. At present we have our great grandfathers clinging to power and political positions. We need to initiate the process of preparing young people to be responsible leaders for today and tomorrow, and responsible politicians now. Let's develop alternative programmes and an alternative narrative that will focus on equipping, strengthening and providing mental health support so that the youth and women can rise to the challenges of leadership in the near future.

What is the solution to the ongoing middle belt crisis when there is a lack of trust in the political leadership because of their conflicting utterances and perceived insensitivity to the suffering and loss of innocent lives?

Distrust and lack of transparency and accountability on the part of the government is responsible for the current agitation by the youths, especially by those who are displaced. Increasingly people feel that the government trivialises their pain and offers no solutions. There is a great deal of pain, anger and agitation. Living conditions in the camps are inhuman, appalling and nothing is being done, with little hope of this improving in the near future. This creates hopelessness and despair. I think it's very important when working with vulnerable community members that we attempt to help them develop coping skills and strategies. We also need to work with government. How do we hold government accountable without resorting to violence? The government needs to be held accountable, they need to be truthful, they need to know that every life has value and their primary responsibility is to protect the lives and property of its citizens.

I have been working with IDPs in Benue, and Taraba, especially those affected by the Fulani

Herdsmen attacks and it is clear that this is genocide.

There has been a campaign for our youths to contest and take control of governance structures in 2019. Do you think they are ready to lead?

Although I believe youths need to be brought on board, it is doubtful they are up to the task simply because of lack of experience. This is because the current structures failed to promote and include youth and women in development. Our President is in his 80s and with a youthful voting population, it would be prudent to include them.

What we need to do without delay is prepare the youth by equipping and training them in good governance and citizenship. We need responsible leaders in the future. We need to look carefully at programmes to equip them if they lack the necessary skills. They need to be economically and psychologically empowered and groomed for leadership positions.

Until they are included and strengthened to drive the political process, we will continue to be a nation ruled by the aged with the same old strategies. Let's focus on preparing for the new.

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